

U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
Senator Richard G. Lugar
Opening Statement for the Hearing on the Middle East with Tony Blair
January 15, 2009

I join the Chairman in welcoming Prime Minister Tony Blair to the Committee. It is an honor to have the Prime Minister with us. In his position as Quartet Representative, he is specifically charged with revitalizing the Palestinian economy, organizing international assistance, and promoting the Quartet objectives. We appreciate the experience and insights he brings to this issue and his willingness to testify.

The United States has a strong national security interest in helping to achieve a resolution of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. Beyond the humanitarian imperative of achieving peace, such a settlement would strengthen American credibility in the region, hinder terrorist propaganda and recruitment, and open new possibilities for cooperation with states in the region on an array of issues. It would also diminish the influence of Iran, which is exploiting the conflict for its own purposes.

President Obama has stated clearly that a comprehensive peace between Israel and the Palestinians is in the national interest of the United States. He says he wants results, not just a process. He has assigned a new special envoy, our friend Senator George Mitchell, to engage in the detailed diplomacy required of such an effort. When we met with Senator Mitchell several weeks ago, he spoke with energy and pragmatism about the task at hand. We also heard from King Abdullah of Jordan three weeks ago, who communicated the support of leaders of the Arab states for “decisive action” toward a settlement. In addition, there is substantial support within Israeli and Palestinian societies for a resolution to the conflict. A recent poll, published by OneVoice, found that 74 percent of Palestinians and 78 percent of Israelis want a two-state solution.

Yet we know that the history of peace negotiations has been extremely difficult and frequently unproductive. Too often, momentum has been stymied by disagreement on minute negotiating points or rhetorical diversions that are nearly inconsequential to the type of bold, comprehensive approach that would be necessary for a settlement. Further, despite substantial support for peace within their respective societies, both the Israelis and the Palestinians are politically divided and their governments lack clear mandates to accept major sacrifices in the interest of peace. A peace settlement would require Israeli and Palestinian leaders with thin majorities to get beyond calculations designed to protect their own political interests.

In this context, generating meaningful progress towards a settlement will require the international community, led by the United States, to be very active and creative in engaging the parties and providing incentives. It is essential that the Administration and Congress be united in our commitment to pursuing peace in the Middle East. We may not agree precisely on tactics, but serious divisions within our government could be exploited by those who have other agendas.

I am hopeful that our government and our partners overseas will work to build international momentum for a settlement, and I am hopeful that we will be bold in proposing options. Both Israel and the Palestinians urgently need international support to fortify their ability and willingness to embrace the difficult choices that will be necessary.

I look forward to our dialogue with Prime Minister Blair.

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